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A puzzling effect of unemployment: A reply to Dülmer and Klein

MARCEL LUBBERS & PEER SCHEEPERS

Abstract. Dülmer and Klein's comments on our article (see *European Journal of Political Research* 38: 63–94) fuels once more the discussion about the contextual effects of unemployment on the likelihood of voting for extreme right-wing parties. Unfortunately, the Dülmer and Klein do not properly evaluate their findings and misrepresent their own results. They do everything to suppress the negative effect of unemployment we previously also found, and miss an opportunity for in-depth research into the relationship between unemployment and extreme right-wing voting. They uncover an interesting effect of education varying according to the proportion of immigrants – something we previously ascertained for exclusionist attitudes, but not for voting behaviour.

Before turning to the core issue in Dülmer and Klein's comments – the puzzling effect of unemployment on extreme right-wing voting behaviour – we must remark upon the fact that it is poorly grounded in recent work on extreme right-wing voting. The authors only refer to their own work and to ours. By ignoring the vast amount of theoretical and empirical research in this field, they misrepresent and consequently dismiss the contextual effects of immigration and unemployment by stating without any theoretical elaboration that they do not expect such effects (e.g., Olzak 1992; Quillian 1995). Moreover, they overlook work that relates directly to the improvements they would like to see in the analysis of voting for parties of the extreme right (Lubbers 2001; Lubbers & Scheepers 2001; Lubbers et al. 2002; Scheepers et al. 2002).

That being said, we think Dülmer and Klein improve upon our work by including cross-level interactions. Although we do not think that models without random slopes are mis-specifications, we are also supporters of testing random slope models, which is a step forward in testing ethnic competition theory. Following the article on which Dülmer and Klein commented, Lubbers (2001) included these random slopes, many of which we found to be non-significant, as in our original article. In yet another contribution related to this theme, we specify and test random slope models (Scheepers et al. 2002) to find that only one of them reaches significance – the one proposed by Dülmer and Klein.

In our opinion, the only new and important finding in their article is that the effect of education varies with levels of immigrants. As Dülmer and Klein establish that the effects of individual characteristics are comparable to the

ones we already made in our 2000 contribution, we believe that there is not much new here that has not been previously corroborated or discussed. One of our main goals was to explain differences between social categories in their support for the Republikaner Party, something for which Dülmer and Klein do not account.

We did indeed mislabel the percentage of ethnic minorities as the population from outside OECD countries in the 2000 publication, yet we used a similar measurement to that used by Dülmer and Klein. The high percentage of ethnic minorities given in our data already suggests the inclusion of Turks in the measurement. Moreover, at the state level, the correlation between the percentage of ethnic minorities including and excluding Turks is +0.96.

Dülmer and Klein claim larger differences in results of the contextual-level effects, but even this is doubtful. Instead of merely specifying regional effects, we included a time dimension, and hence tested whether in a region/time combination certain competitive levels were larger and therefore extreme right-wing voting more widespread. The theoretical implications are similar though. In a later contribution, Lubbers (2001) described the effect of increasing numbers of immigrants as more a time effect and less a regional-level effect. The main difference, then, is the negative effect of the unemployment level, where Dülmer and Klein claim a non-significant effect.

The introduction of the Kreis level in the Dülmer and Klein contribution is worthwhile, and we emphasize that these data could improve testing contextual-level effects. The approach provides more units of analysis and, consequently, more detailed information. It is therefore all the more surprising that Dülmer and Klein turn against our finding of a negative unemployment effect as they corroborate this themselves *even on the district level* (see their Table 1). Unfortunately they refrain from addressing the theoretical implications of their findings; instead, they seem more concerned with the question of how to suppress this negative effect of unemployment level. The negative effect of unemployment disappears after modelling varying intercepts at the state level. This level accounts for a large amount of the variation: 'there is a highly significant variability of the intercepts (chi-square = 155.301, d.f. = 9) across the Bundesländer'. In other words, the Bundesländer are not such a bad level of analysis after all.

The authors go on to suppress the unemployment effect. Instead of introducing the unemployment effect at the state level next to the now insignificant effect of unemployment at the district level, they come up with a 'Republikaner opportunity structure' measurement. This measurement – not surprisingly – explains a large part of the variation between the regions: the larger the actual percentages of voters for the Republikaner at the 1998 national elections in comparison to the percentages for the DVU and NDP

the larger the likelihood to vote Republikaner. We consider this theoretical argument to be somewhat tautological. Moreover, this measurement suppresses other effects. If we had used the same measurement of 'opportunity structure' as suggested by the authors, it would not have changed any of our results simply because neither the DVU nor the NDP competed in the 1994 general elections. The odds of opportunity structure would have been similar for all Bundesländer.

We think the authors have missed an opportunity here even though they used more detailed data regarding contextual-level effects. Although we do not reject the notion that historical traditions, as well as party characteristics and opportunity structures, could be important in explaining extreme right-wing voting (see, e.g., Lubbers et al. 2002), we believe that one should be very cautious when taking such variables into account. Proposing that the extreme right-wing is larger in a region because it has a history of right-wing extremism is rather trivial.

We omitted NPD and DVU voters less due to strategic considerations than because only three respondents had answered that they would vote for these parties at the time. At another time – the one to which Dülmer and Klein refer – when those parties indeed received support and there were respondents in the dataset who voted for them, it would indeed become more important to control for party structures when choosing one of the three as the study object. However, our choice then would be to study all three party preferences at one time.

To account for ethnic competition effects, it is even stranger that for the 1997 situation, when particularly the DVU was active, the authors only take into account Republikaner voting. We believe that the negative effect in Western Germany on voting for extreme right-wing parties in total would not have changed. Taking Republikaner, DVU and NDP support in the 1998 elections together (see Figure 1), there is a negative bivariate correlation between unemployment at the state level and extreme right-wing support.

The authors could have made more progress if they had turned to this peculiar relationship between unemployment and extreme right-wing voting behaviour more in depth. Several analyses reach similar conclusions (Anderson 1996; Knigge 1998; Lubbers 2001): the unemployment level has either a non-significant or a negative effect. As Kitschelt (1995: 90) puts it, 'economic affluence and the comprehensiveness of welfare states are a baseline precondition for the rise of the contemporary extreme right'. The German situation could provide new insights: when Eastern Germany is also taken into account, there seems to be a curvilinear relationship between the two variables since 1998. Now, this would have been a more interesting point of departure for developing research in this area.

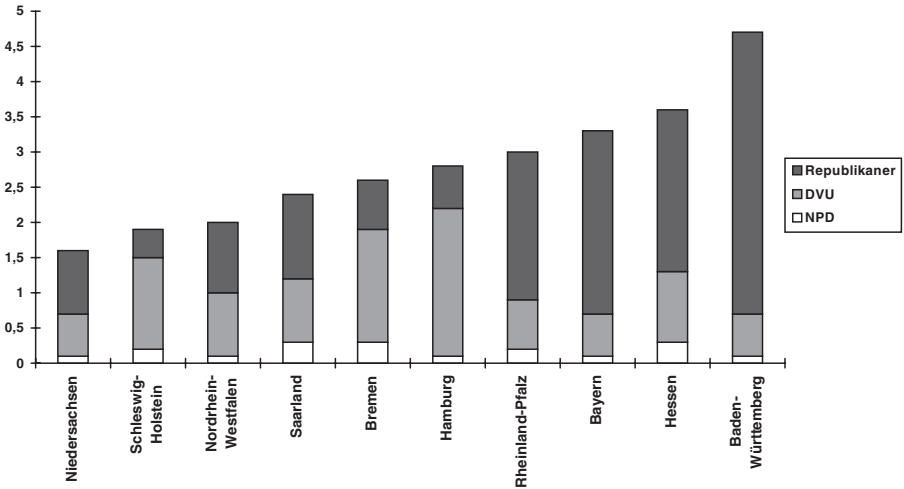


Figure 1. Level of vote for the Republikaner, DVU and NPD parties, 1998.

Source: www.bundeswahlleiter.de/wahlen/ergeb98/d/lanu.htm.

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